PATTERNS OF POWER

A COMPARATIVE ESSAY

For the Defence of the Realm

on two settled states, a century and four thousand miles apart, that could not stop a mobile people from raiding them and so granted that people land and a commission to keep out the others — on why the move was correct, and on the two different ways it comes due

ROUEN 911 · NASA 1035

Thomas J. Bryan

with Claude (Anthropic)

Held as tested, not revealed.

Two documents

In the year 426 of the Muslim era — 1035 — three brothers wrote a very humble letter to the vizier of the sultan of Ghazna. They had been driven out of Khwarazm, they had perhaps seven to ten thousand fighting men and their families and their flocks, and they were on the wrong side of a frontier with nothing behind them. They described themselves as slaves, and as clients of the Commander of the Faithful, and they asked for the towns of Nasa and Farava.

What they offered in exchange was a service. They would keep the frontier clear: no raider would be allowed through from Mount Balkhan, from Dihistan, from the marches of Khwarazm or the banks of the Oxus, and they themselves would fight the other Turkmen — the ones already in Khurasan and the ones still beyond it. And they added a line that reads as a plea and functions as a threat: if the sultan would not agree, they did not know what would happen, for they had nowhere else to go.

Eighty-three years earlier and four thousand miles to the west, a chancery clerk of Charles the Simple drew up a diploma at Compiègne, dated 14 March 918. It concerned a donation to the abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, and it carved out an exception: certain lands were excluded from the gift because the king had already granted them to Rollo and his companions. The reason it gives for that earlier grant is three words long. *Pro tutela regni* — for the protection of the realm.

Two states with a raiding problem they could not solve. Two grants of land to the raiders. Two commissions to keep out the others of their kind, entered in the granting power's own records as an act of defence.

There is no connection between them. Nobody in Ghazna had heard of Normandy and nobody in Rouen had heard of the Oghuz. What they had in common was a position.

The move

State it plainly, because it looks like weakness and is not.

A settled state with a fixed revenue, walled towns and a slow army is being raided by a people who are fast, dispersed, and not attached to anything the state can take. The state cannot defeat them in the sense that matters. It can win battles — it frequently does — and winning changes nothing, because a defeated raiding force does not surrender a

capital or sign an instrument of submission. It rides away and comes back, or a different band comes instead.

Worse, the state is not facing one raider. It is facing a category. West Francia had been raided by Northmen for a century by different fleets under different leaders; Khurasan already contained one wave of Turkmen admitted a decade earlier, with more behind them on the Oxus and more again in Khwarazm.

That is what makes the move rational rather than desperate. Against a single enemy you fight. Against a *category* of enemy arriving indefinitely, the cheapest available instrument is to convert one of them into a permanent, territorial, interested defender against the rest — because a defender who is himself of that kind knows the ground, the tactics, the routes and the men, and because he now has something to lose that the others do not.

And the state gives away, in the first instance, remarkably little. The land granted to Rollo was territory around the mouth of the Seine that had been under Danish control for some time already; the king was formalising a fact. The towns granted to the Seljuks — Nasa to Tughril, Dihistan to Chaghri, Farava to Musa Yabghu — were frontier settlements in the foothills of the Kopet Dagh, on the exposed edge of Khurasan, precisely the places the sultan could not hold anyway.

The move is: give away what you have already lost, to one of the men taking it, in exchange for his keeping the rest of them off the part you still hold. Put like that it is not a capitulation. It is a reasonable trade, and both states had good reason to expect it to work.

The one that came due in five years

Follow Khurasan first, because the timetable is brutal.

Mas'ud of Ghazna did not want the deal. He regarded the nomads as dangerous — his father had thought so too, and had cooperated with the Karakhanid khagan in 1025 to have the Seljuk leader Arslan Isra'il lured to Samarkand, arrested and exiled to India, where he died. When the brothers' letter arrived Mas'ud's answer was an army: some fifteen thousand cavalry with two thousand palace *ghulams* under the chamberlain Begtughdi, which set out for Nasa in June 1035.

It was destroyed. The Seljuks used a feigned withdrawal, drew the Ghaznavid force after them and turned on it.

Then Mas'ud granted the towns — after the defeat, with a formal recognition of tribal autonomy inside the Ghaznavid state, in exchange for the Seljuks' recognition of his authority and their undertaking to protect the region from other Turkic tribes. The grant is the same grant they had asked for politely six months earlier and been refused.

It bought almost nothing. Within months Chaghri's horsemen were raiding deep into Ghaznavid territory, towards Balkh and into Sistan and Tukharistan, driving off livestock and pasturing their flocks on other men's land. In 1037 the Ghaznavids ceded Sarakhs, Abivard and Merv. In 1038 the Seljuks took Nishapur and Tughril had himself proclaimed sultan of Khurasan. In 1040 at Dandanaqan the Ghaznavid field army was destroyed and Khurasan was gone.

Five years from the grant to the loss of the province. Twenty from the humble letter to Tughril's entry into Baghdad.

And the reason is that the grant bought the chief and not the following.

This is the thing to hold onto, because it is the whole mechanism. A nomadic confederation's leader is not a sovereign with a bureaucracy and a garrison. He has no apparatus for compelling his own men. His authority consists very largely in his ability to bring them to plunder and to distribute what is taken. A treaty requiring him to stop them plundering is therefore a treaty requiring him to dismantle the basis on which they follow him at all.

Whether Tughril and Chaghri were negotiating in good faith and could not hold their men, or were never intending to, is not recoverable and the essay takes no position on it. The structural point does not depend on the answer. **A grant made to the head of a raiding confederation is enforceable against exactly one man, and the thing being granted is not something his followers can eat.** Three frontier towns will not pasture the flocks of ten thousand families. The pressure that had driven them across the Oxus was still behind them the day after the treaty was sealed.

The one that came due in a hundred and fifty-five years

Now the Seine, where the same move produced an entirely different history.

The sequence at the front end is closely comparable and instructively inverted. Charles the Simple faced Rollo at Chartres in 911 and — on the usual reading — *won*. The Northmen were beaten and remained formidable, and the king made the grant anyway.

That inversion is worth pausing on, because it disposes of the idea that these grants are what a state does when it has lost. Mas'ud granted after a defeat; Charles granted after a victory. **The grant is not a function of who won the battle. It is a function of the host's judgement that winning the battle would not settle anything** — which, against a mobile enemy arriving in successive fleets, it would not have.

The terms are the same three-part instrument: land, a commission to defend against others of the same kind, and incorporation into the host's legitimating framework — in this case baptism and an oath of fealty, making Rollo the king's man and a Christian.

And it worked. Not perfectly, not immediately, but in the sense that matters: the lower Seine ceased to be a corridor for other raiders, Rollo's successors held and extended the territory, and within a few generations the Northmen of Rouen were Frankish-speaking Christian princes running a functioning county on Frankish administrative lines.

The bill still came, and its size was enormous, but it came a hundred and fifty-five years later and it was not presented to the man who signed. In 1066 the descendants of the men granted the mouth of the Seine took England. The duchy became the most formidable principality in France and the Capetian kings spent three centuries on the problem of a vassal who was also a king.

What the following wanted

Two identical moves, two failure modes, and the variable that separates them is not the wording of the grant or the competence of the granting power. It is what the *followers* wanted.

There is a small detail in the Norman tradition that carries the point. Rollo was reportedly offered Flanders first and turned it down as too stony, holding out for arable land.

Whatever the reliability of that particular story — and the whole Rollo narrative has a source problem discussed below — it describes the right kind of man. Someone haggling

over soil quality is not negotiating for a raiding base. He is negotiating for a farm. The Northmen of the Seine had been wintering in Francia for decades, taking wives locally, and moving from plunder toward settlement well before any king authorised it. The grant ratified a process already under way, which is why it held: the followers got the thing they actually wanted, and a man with a farm stops being a raider without anyone having to make him.

The Turkmen wanted pasture and plunder, in that order, and they wanted it for a confederation with flocks. Three towns on a mountain frontier answered neither need at the scale required. The grant did not satisfy the following; it gave the following a legal address from which to continue.

So the diagnostic, before any such grant is made, is not what the chief will sign. It is what his men are for. Where the following wants land and is already drifting toward it, the grant converts them, and the bill is deferred by generations and paid by somebody else. Where the following wants mobility and plunder, the grant supplies a base, a revenue and a legitimate standing from which to do more of it, and the bill arrives inside a decade.

What the host was actually selling

Which brings us to the part of the transaction that neither state seems to have priced, and which both raiders took eagerly.

Look at what the Seljuk brothers put at the top of their letter. They called themselves slaves. They called themselves clients of the Commander of the Faithful. That is not merely a polite formula; it is a claim to a position inside the Islamic political order — and twenty years later Tughril was in Baghdad, being invested with titles by that same caliph, having his name read in the Friday prayer, and negotiating a marriage into the caliphal house. The self-abasement of 1035 and the investiture of 1055 are the same claim at two stages of maturity.

Look at what Rollo accepted. Baptism, homage, a Frankish title, and — in the tradition, though the marriage is very likely an invention — a bride from the royal house. Within a century the ducal house was employing a chronicler to construct its Carolingian dignity.

In both cases the host believed he was purchasing subordination. What he was in fact transferring was **standing**.

A raider outside the system is a problem to be managed; he has no claim on anything, cannot appeal to any rule, and cannot be a party to any internal dispute. A raider who has been baptised, titled, enfeoffed, invested and entered in the chancery records has become a legitimate participant in the host's own political order — with a recognised position, a defensible claim, and the ability to contest the order's future from the inside, in its own vocabulary, before its own audience.

The commission to keep out the others is the smaller half of the grant. The larger half is admission. And admission cannot be withdrawn by the same instrument that conferred it, because the whole value of the conferral to the host lay in its being taken seriously by everyone else.

Reading the hired guard against the framework

Where a settled order faces not one mobile enemy but a category of them, hiring one against the rest is the cheapest instrument available and is usually correct. It should not be read as weakness or as a failure of nerve. It answers a real structural problem that battlefield victory does not answer, it costs the host land he has generally already lost, and it works often enough to be a standing item on the menu — the Romans did it with Gothic *foederati*, the Byzantines with steppe peoples on the Danube, and it recurs wherever a fixed order abuts a mobile one. **The analytic instruction is therefore not to treat the move as a mistake but to identify the two variables that determine what it costs.**

The first variable: does the grant reach the following, or only the chief? A raiding confederation's leader commands by leading to plunder and distributing it; he has no coercive apparatus over his own men and cannot deliver their compliance even where he intends to. So a grant enforceable against one man, of an asset his followers cannot use, buys nothing and is discovered to have bought nothing within a season. **Before granting, price what the following needs at the scale it exists, not what the chief will accept on their behalf** — and note that the chief will accept, because the terms cost him nothing he has.

The second variable: is the following already settling? Where the raiders have begun wintering, marrying locally and holding ground of their own accord, the grant

ratifies a conversion already in progress and will hold, because a man with arable land is no longer in the raiding business and requires no supervision to stop. Where they are still mobile and still under pressure from behind, the grant provides a base rather than a substitute. **The tell is what the raider haggles about.** A chief who argues about soil quality is negotiating a settlement. A chief who says he has nowhere else to go is telling you that the pressure which produced him has not gone anywhere either.

And the third finding, which neither host appears to have priced: a commission of this kind transfers standing, and standing is the part that cannot be taken back. Both grants were dressed in the host's legitimating language — baptism and homage in one case, the language of clientage to the Commander of the Faithful in the other — and in both cases the raider adopted the dress instantly and enthusiastically, because it was worth far more to him than to the man conferring it. The host reads the submission formula as an acknowledgement of subordination. It is an entry ticket. **Where a state incorporates an outsider into its own framework of legitimacy in order to bind him, it has converted an external threat, which can only be fought, into an internal claimant, which must be argued with** — and internal claimants, having a recognised position and a defensible title, are precisely the parties from whom structural change comes.

Nineteen years after the humble letter, the grandson of a Turkmen chief who had begged for two frontier towns rode into Baghdad and the caliph made him sultan. A hundred and fifty-five years after the baptism at the Epte, the descendants of the men who had received the mouth of the Seine took a kingdom. Neither state was defeated by the raiders it had hired. Both were absorbed by them.

A note on sources. Two documents are quoted here in short compass and both need flagging. The Latin *pro tutela regni* — for the protection of the realm — is from a royal diploma issued at Compiègne on 14 March 918, excepting from a donation to Saint-Germain-des-Prés lands previously granted to Rollo and his companions. It is documentary and contemporary and is the firmest evidence in the Norman half of this essay; I have not seen the charter itself and take the phrase and its context from the reference literature. The Seljuk letter of 426/1035 to Mas'ud's vizier is reported by Abu'l-Fadl Bayhaqi, a Ghaznavid chancery secretary and therefore a contemporary and an insider, in his *Ta'rikh-i Mas'udi*. I have not read the Persian; the English fragments used above — the brothers styling themselves slaves and clients of the Commander of the Faithful, and their statement that they had nowhere else to go — are taken from modern

renderings in C. E. Bosworth's political history of the Iranian world and in secondary accounts drawing on A. C. S. Peacock, and are quoted as briefly as the argument permits rather than reproduced. The remainder of the letter's contents, including the undertaking to fight the Iraqi and Khwarazmian Turkmen and to keep the approaches clear, is paraphrased from those renderings.

The evidentiary weight of the two halves is very unequal and the essay should not disguise it. The Seljuk sequence rests on a contemporary insider's chronicle and is unusually well attested: the 1025 removal of Arslan Isra'il, the defeat of Begtughdi's force near Nasa in June 1035, the subsequent grant of Nasa, Dihistan and Farava with tribal autonomy, the further cessions of 1037, the capture of Nishapur in 1038 and Dandanaqan in 1040. Troop figures are the usual unreliable ones and are given as reported: roughly seven to ten thousand Turkmen fighting men, about fifteen thousand Ghaznavid cavalry with two thousand palace *ghulams*. The Norman sequence is far weaker. No text of the 911 agreement survives; the only source that dates it is Dudo of Saint-Quentin, writing around 996–1015 as a panegyrist of the ducal house, whose chronology is unreliable enough that historians have periodically doubted the treaty happened at all. Flodoard of Reims, a near-contemporary, corroborates that Rollo received lands near Rouen without giving terms, and the 918 diploma confirms the grant and its stated purpose. So the date of 911, the location at Saint-Clair-sur-Epte, the marriage to Gisela and the story about Flanders being refused as too stony are all Dudo's, and the marriage in particular is very likely an invention: contemporary annals record the grant, the baptism and the defence obligation and say nothing of any royal bride. The Flanders detail is used above for what it illustrates and is explicitly not relied upon. Jean Renaud's observation that the king granted territory already substantially under Danish control is from his chapter in *The Viking World*. The comparison to Roman and Byzantine practice is gestured at rather than argued and no claim about either is made here beyond the existence of the pattern.